

The State of City Leadership for Children and Families

2009



National League of Cities
Institute for Youth, Education, & Families



About the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (YEF Institute) is a special entity within the National League of Cities (NLC).

NLC is the oldest and largest national organization representing municipal government throughout the United States. Its mission is to strengthen and promote cities as centers of opportunity, leadership, and governance.

The YEF Institute helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities. NLC launched the YEF Institute in January 2000 in recognition of the unique and influential roles that mayors, city councilmembers, and other local leaders play in strengthening families and improving outcomes for children and youth.

Through the YEF Institute, municipal officials and other community leaders have direct access to a broad array of strategies and tools, including:

- Action kits that offer a menu of practical steps that officials can take to address key problems or challenges.
- Technical assistance projects in selected communities.
- The National Summit on Your City's Families and other workshops, training sessions, and cross-site meetings.
- Targeted research and periodic surveys of local officials.
- The YEF Institute's Web site, audioconferences, and e-mail listservs.

To learn more about these tools and other aspects of the YEF Institute's work, go to www.nlc.org/iyef or leave a message on the YEF Institute's information line at 202/626-3014.

Youth in Transition



Youth in Transition

Key Goals:

- Provide a network of support specific to the needs of youth in transition, such as those moving from foster care or the juvenile justice system to independence; runaway or homeless youth; school dropouts; first-time parents; or recent immigrants.
- Help young people connect or re-connect to mainstream activities, such as education and jobs, as well as to supports such as caring adults, social and health services and housing.
- Create new opportunities for cross-system collaboration across diverse public — city, county and state — agencies, as well as private service providers, to more effectively meet the needs of at-risk youth.

Innovations:

- Coordinating services for youth aging out of foster care.
- Providing transitional jobs to court-involved youth.
- Creating collaborative interagency structures.

Emerging Trends:

- Building a local infrastructure focused on the needs of homeless youth.
- Streamlining access to services for youth in transition.
- Utilizing truancy interventions to help youth get back on track.

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Established Trends:

- Supporting summer jobs programs.
- Operating teen parenting programs.
- Providing evening recreational opportunities for at-risk youth.

Innovations

Coordinating services for youth aging out of foster care.

In the city of Philadelphia, hundreds of young people per year face the difficult transition from foster care to independence, often without the necessary preparation, resources and supports to successfully hold down a job and take care of their own housing, food and other needs. As a result, these young people experience high rates of unemployment, homelessness, dependence on social services, victimization and even crime. To provide needed supports, in 2002 the city's Department of Human Services (DHS) partnered with the Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation, the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services and the non-profit Philadelphia Youth Network to design and fund a welcoming center for 16- to 20-year-olds who are in the foster care system (or were when they were 16).

Philadelphia's Achieving Independence Center is a centrally located gateway to services designed to provide foster youth with a chance to earn and save, in-house job training, housing assistance, computer skills, educational supports, life skills and counseling to help prevent unwanted pregnancies.

The result of their collaboration was a unique one-stop center for older foster youth called the Achieving Independence Center (AI Center). This centrally located gateway to services was designed to provide youth with a chance to earn and save, in-house job training, housing assistance, computer skills, educational supports, life skills and counseling to help prevent unwanted pregnancies. The center — with non-traditional hours, flexible scheduling for both in-school and out-of-school youth and an arrangement with a nearby child care provider for participants with children — minimizes the need for youth to have to “office-hop” and addresses common barriers to needed services.

Eligible youth who sign up with the center become “members for life,” often returning to share their experiences with young people who are preparing to become independent. Despite being a government program, young people like to spend time at the center and it is generally crowded on weekend nights.

With this membership model as a backdrop, the delivery of services begins with an orientation, individualized assessment and the development of a coaching-mentoring relationship with the youth. In a “hub and spoke” model, both members and their coaches determine which tracks of services (or spokes) they will utilize in their goal to achieve independence; this forms the basis for a member development plan.

Focusing on employability and practical tools for successful independent living, the AI Center has been effective in providing much needed services through strategic partnerships. After designing a conceptual plan with its agency partners, DHS issued a request for proposals and selected a private firm well known for its work with welfare and workforce delivery programs as the program manager. This managing agency works with DHS to coordinate a total of 13 co-located agencies, each with a unique service offering. Some of the most successful partnerships have allowed foster youth to benefit from the following services: on-site employment and training services; housing and credit counseling; tutoring, GED instruction and college and financial aid counseling; mentoring; computer classes; and education about health, relationships and sexuality.

Since the AI Center opened in December 2002, more than 3,300 youth in transition have become members. Of 46 these, 600 or more have graduated from high school or received a GED, more than 650 have enrolled in college or other post-secondary school and 37 have graduated from higher education. 756 youth have been linked to full- or part-time employment at an average wage of \$7.67 per hour.

Related innovations:

- The U.S. Department of Labor provided support to community groups and municipal governments — including New York City and Los Angeles/Pasadena — to provide “one stop” service centers for youth transitioning out of foster care.

Providing transitional jobs to court-involved youth.

Without a high school diploma, without prior work experience or with a criminal record, many vulnerable youth are unable to find and keep a job. A small number of cities have taken steps to offer youth “transitional jobs” — temporary, paid employment with close supervision and wrap-around support services — to help them overcome barriers to work, develop good references and move into unsubsidized employment. In Boston, Youth Options Unlimited (YOU) Boston provides transitional jobs, intensive case management and educational support and placement to help court-involved and/or gang-affiliated youth, ages 14 to 24, develop the workplace skills, academic skills and life skills to succeed in a work environment.

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Now in its eighth year, YOU Boston is a division of the Mayor’s Office of Jobs and Community Services and has established 501(c)(3) non-profit status to continue and expand services through the contributions of private foun-

dations and additional funding sources, including a state anti-gang initiative grant. YOU Boston was initially launched to serve a wide variety of youth in transition, and in 2005, the city chose to focus on court-involved youth. YOU now works with young people from every Boston neighborhood at its central location in the Roxbury neighborhood and throughout the community.

Serving in part as a juvenile and young adult “reentry” program, YOU staff members begin to meet with clients prior to their release from juvenile or adult facilities or treatment programs to build trusting relationships and initiate individual service plans prior to the client’s return to the community. Once in the Transitional Employment Service Program (TES), staff focus on preparing clients to develop the fundamental skills that are required to retain any type of employment, while assisting those that have advanced through the TES continuum as they seek permanent placements in the workforce or long-term skills training. Given the value of education as it relates to earnings over a lifetime and success in the workforce, YOU includes an educational component within the TES curriculum and insists that clients be participating and progressing in their educational plan to maintain their subsidized wage.

The program’s first level of employment readiness includes a two-week Pre-Placement employment series focused on conflict resolution, decision making, leadership, teamwork and communication. This is an interactive, eight day session that involves role plays based on actual scenarios youth may encounter when they are on the worksite. Youth are subsidized at minimum wage throughout the YOU TES programming. Level two is called Bridge, and provides a subsidized transitional job at a partner agency or organization with a team of peers. Unlike typical youth employment, these jobs are closely supervised and accompanied by critical support services to help young people overcome challenges. When participants show enough maturity and an appropriate skill set, they progress to an Individual Placement with a community partner, working up to 25 hours per week on their own, while still being subsidized and supported weekly by YOU staff.

Under the leadership of Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino, Youth Options Unlimited has developed and maintained invaluable relationships with the Boston Police Department, Boston School Police, Department of Youth Services, Suffolk County House of Correction, Youth Service Providers Network (social work arm of the Boston Police), Boston Centers for Youth and Families (Streetworker program), Adult and Juvenile Probation, Boston Public Schools, Boston Public Health Commission, Private Industry Council and an alternative school network. YOU works with these partners on a regular basis to identify and refer young people who are in the greatest need of these services and to ensure that all programming is organized to ensure the safety of all young people. In addition, YOU collaborates with other successful service providers for this population in the greater Boston area such as the Maritime Apprenticeship Program (operated by the Hull Life Saving Museum), Action for Boston Community Development, the Ten Point Coalition (an ecumenical Christian group focused on troubled youth) and Youth Build.

YOU strives to maintain more than 60 subsidized employment placements throughout the year, with an expanded TES program during the summer months placing more than 120 youth. In the summer of 2008, the TES program included 141 youth representing 47 different gang affiliations; YOU achieved a 76 percent overall retention rate, with more than 100 of the participants working at least five of the seven weeks.

Of the 769 court-involved or gang-affiliated young people participating in Youth Options Unlimited Boston from 2006 through the spring of 2009, all received subsidized work; 160 moved on to educational placements and 120 were placed in unsubsidized jobs. For more information, see: www.youboston.org

Related innovations:

- San Francisco provides subsidized employment opportunities to 1,400 high school aged youth who are on probation through the Mayor’s Youth Employment and Education Program.
- Close to 1,400 New York City youth who were not in school or the workforce participated in New York City’s Young Adult Internship Program, receiving paid internships, job training and educational support.

Creating a collaborative interagency structure to support youth in transition.

In San Francisco, a collaborative, city-funded entity — the Transitional Age Youth Initiative (TAY SF) — focuses attention, resources and partnerships on the needs of the city's 80,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 as they transition into adulthood.

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In the spring of 2005, the San Francisco Youth Commission, a diverse group of youth between the ages of 12 and 23 appointed to provide feedback on city policies and budget decisions, passed a resolution calling on the mayor to create a citywide planning body to address the needs of young adults who were too old to receive services through the Children's Fund. Mayor Gavin Newsom recognized that providing better supports at this critical age could improve outcomes — for individual youth and for the broader community. In March 2006 he launched a Mayor's Transitional Youth Task Force (TYTF). Over the course of a year, TYTF committees and workgroups met on more than 60 occasions to review data, set priorities and develop strategies for meeting the complex, unmet needs of at-risk youth and young adults. The task force focused on youth transitioning through public systems (such as foster care, juvenile justice and special education); parenting youth; recent immigrants; youth with disabilities; and young people not on track to graduate from high school.

In early 2008, Mayor Newsom created TAY SF as a permanent interagency council charged with implementing the 16 policy strategies developed by the task force. These strategies, which are aimed at making improvements in education, employment, wellness, health and housing resources and opportunities for young people in San Francisco, are organized into four critical areas:

- Making transitional age youth a priority;
- Improving the quality of service delivery;
- Enhancing coordination of services; and
- Increasing system capacity.

To do this, TAY SF connects youth service providers, engages youth and local leadership and promotes best practices to empower youth as they enter adulthood.

In addition to being the catalyst for the creation of the Transitional Age Youth Initiative, the City of San Francisco fully funds the initiative, covering the salaries of three staff, youth stipends and the cost of office space and supplies. TAY SF staff benefit from ongoing youth input through its Young Adult Team. This diverse group of transitional age youth provides input on city policies and advocates on behalf of populations that might otherwise be ignored.

In the first few months of operation TAY SF produced a resource guide for youth service providers and launched an e-newsletter to serve as a place for providers to connect with each other and to learn about current transitional age youth legislation, publications and events. The TAY SF initiative is also planning for San Francisco's first comprehensive multi-service center to deliver seamless, culturally competent services. In addition, the initiative has utilized local graduate students to help analyze the practices of city departments, the workforce development system and youth service providers to make recommendations about how to better serve youth in transition. In a 2009 report, TAY SF set forth new priorities and approaches to creating a data system that can drive a comprehensive disconnected youth policy agenda. For more information, see: www.taysf.org

Related innovations:

- Washington, D.C., recently created an Interagency Collaboration and Services Integration Commission to promote collaboration — including shared indicators, data and quarterly targets — on issues related to children and youth, including the special

needs of disconnected youth. (See description in chapter on city infrastructure for children, youth and families.)

Emerging Trends

Building a local infrastructure focused on the needs of homeless youth.

Recognizing that youth who are on the street are particularly vulnerable, a small but growing number of cities have focused new attention on the special needs of homeless young people in recent years. While young people end up homeless for a variety of reasons, there are some common challenges faced by many homeless youth. Nearly a quarter identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender or questioning (LGBTQ); two-thirds have suffered from physical or sexual abuse; three-quarters have dropped out of school; and up to 80 percent have mental health issues or use drugs. In addition, many youth in the foster care system become homeless after they are “emancipated” (generally at age 18); nearly a quarter of youth who have exited the foster care system experience homelessness and a third of all homeless adults report a foster care history.

City initiatives can help young people find immediate, appropriate shelter, followed by access to transitional housing, employment services and other needed supports to maintain stable housing

City initiatives can help young people find immediate, appropriate shelter, followed by access to transitional housing, employment services and other needed supports to maintain stable housing. To do this, cities generally create or participate in a coalition or commission to provide overall planning and service coordination for area residents who are homeless, with a special focus on homeless youth. Some specific approaches often include creating or designating facilities that provide shelter or transitional housing specifically for youth; launching special prevention and outreach programs targeting the root causes of youth homelessness; and working with service providers to identify and meet the unique needs of common subgroups among the homeless youth population.

The City of Seattle, for instance, created staff positions within the Human Services Department focused on homeless youth and actively participates in two collaborative working bodies, one representing public systems and agencies and the other for community organizations and youth-serving groups. Seattle’s investment in homeless youth totals approximately \$3.5 million — a blend of general fund dollars, grants and privately raised funding — and centers around five main strategies that are all carried out in partnership with other agencies and providers: direct street outreach with homeless youth hired as outreach staff; dynamic drop-in centers with an emphasis on employment, education and recreation; a continual focus on education; interagency collaboration; and transitional and long-term housing. Key to Seattle’s success in these strategies has been the emphasis placed on targeting smaller sub-groups of homeless youth, such as Native Americans, pregnant teens and teen parents, recent immigrants and LGBTQ youth.

Similarly, the City of Minneapolis has been collaborating with Hennepin County and other local stakeholders through the Commission to End Homelessness, taking the lead on youth issues, which make up approximately one-third of the commission’s activities. With a full-time staff member overseeing homeless youth issues at the commission, they have launched efforts to address family conflict resolution, improve services at the time of discharge from systems such as foster care and promote a youth-development culture among homeless service providers who are used to dealing with adults to equip them to serve young people better. The commission also created a new Bridge Center for Youth in 2008, an 18-bed transitional living center providing a variety of services to homeless youth. The city is one of several partners that have funded the new facility, providing more than \$1.8 million in grants and deferred loans to The Bridge.

Cities such as San Francisco and Berkeley, Calif., have partnered with community organizations to establish multi-service centers for homeless youth. In addition to meeting basic needs for food and shelter, these centers provide young people with on-site access to supports and services aimed at transitioning out of homelessness.

Selected cities building an infrastructure to serve homeless youth: Berkeley, Calif.; Denver; Las Vegas; Minneapolis; Nashville, Tenn.; Portland, Ore.; San Francisco; Seattle.

Streamlining access to services for youth in transition.

For years, resources and services for youth in transition were located in a wide variety of city agencies, schools and nonprofits, making them difficult for young people to learn about and access. A recent movement to address this problem has led a growing number of cities to pull together youth services — access to GED/pre-GED classes, career counseling, classes and online courses to help youth earn a diploma, life skills, social activities and clubs, job readiness and placement, training in high growth industries, college fair/tours, health and fitness and youth-led community service opportunities — so that these systems can better serve young residents. In some cases this is taking place in a particular location that pulls youth services together. In other cases, a “service navigator” provides this coordination and eases access to supports.

The City of Baltimore has streamlined access to services for out-of-school young adults (ages 16-22) through two Youth Opportunity (YO!) Baltimore centers. Located in different parts of town, these centers provide the education and career skills (including some paid work experiences) necessary for success in adulthood. One center has also added an on-site school. Started in 1999 with a Department of Labor Youth Opportunity Grant, Baltimore voted to provide funding to sustain this initiative after federal funding for the YO! Program ran out in July 2006. The program’s positive results — GED achievement at twice the rate of nonparticipants, one-third higher earnings, 25 percent lower likelihood of pregnancy among female participants — continue to make this an important city investment.

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Similarly, Newark, N.J., brought key partners together — including city agencies, Newark Public Schools, Rutgers University, The Nicholson Foundation and numerous service providers — to launch the Youth Education and Employment Success Center (YE²S) in 2008. Operated by Rutgers University, the YE²S Center offers out-of-school or court-involved youth (ages 16 to 21) counseling, education and job-training in a youth-friendly environment. In addition, the center seeks to engage disconnected youth in the process of making the community more supportive of their needs, through activities such as “speak out” sessions and youth community mapping.

In St. Louis, the city and 10 partner organizations created the SPOT (Supporting Positive Opportunities with Teens) in the fall of 2008 to a focus on reducing the rates of sexually transmitted diseases amongst vulnerable youth. Going beyond traditional confidential free testing, youth ages 13 to 24 can benefit from youth development counselors, job referral services, after school computer labs, laundry facilities and other health-related services at this one-stop center. In its first quarter, more than 600 youth visited and made use of the center’s services, with an average of 22 visits per day.

In Albany, N.Y., the city utilizes a single point of contact rather than a single physical location to streamline access to services. More than 300 young people each year meet with personal “service navigators” from the Department of Youth and Workforce Services. Through a series of two-to-four meetings, including at least one involving the young person’s parents, the service navigator builds a relationship with the young person and develops an individualized service strategy, including referrals to one or more members of a partnership of six organizations. The service navigator provides oversight for all of the case managers who are working directly with the youth and tracks progress toward specific goals, such as higher graduation rates, better preparation for employment and development of life skills among disconnected youth. Biweekly meetings among the service providers help ensure coordinated eligibility determinations, administrative and case management and maximum leveraging of funding, as well as referrals beyond the service navigator partnership as needed.

Selected cities streamlining access to services for youth in transition include: Albany, N.Y.; Baltimore; Newark, N.J.; New York City; Philadelphia; San Francisco; St. Louis.

Utilizing truancy interventions to help youth get back on track.

Truancy is a warning sign that a young person is heading down a path that may have more serious, long-term consequences, from dropping out of school to teen pregnancy or youth violence. In at least 14 cities, community partnerships are utilizing truancy interventions to ensure that truant youth and their families are connected to positive resources and supports. While these municipalities vary in their approach, most have found that active partnerships between the police, the schools and social service providers are crucial to success. Strong leadership by a local elected official can help generate a high degree of support among partner agencies.

Community partnerships between the police, schools and social service providers are utilizing truancy interventions to ensure that truant youth and their families are connected to positive resources and supports.

These cities are taking a positive, rather than punitive, approach. For instance, the City of York, Pa., began monthly curfew rounds, taking truant youth to a local community center staffed with caring professionals, rather than the police station, to help them access a wide range of services and counseling.

In September 1999, Corpus Christi, Texas, combined its efforts to address truant youth and nighttime curfew violators through a Juvenile Assessment Center (JAC), which provides a round-the-clock single point of entry to needed services. Youth offenders and their parents can participate in a needs assessment and receive three months of free, comprehensive case management. A 2006-2007 report indicates that out of nearly 400 youth participating in the JAC case management program, only 21, or approximately 5 percent, committed delinquent offenses afterwards.

The police department in Sacramento, Calif., enlisted support from the school district, human services agencies and many community-based organizations to provide important supports — parenting classes, counseling, job skill training and drug treatment services — at the attendance center at Burbank High School. In addition, the services and referrals at these centers are available to parents of truant students. By the end of the first year, of the 250 truant students who passed through the attendance center, 91 were regularly attending school, grand theft in the area dropped by 31 percent and there was a documented improvement in student attitudes about school.

Selected cities preventing truancy through community collaborations: Albany, N.Y.; Bossier, La.; Corpus Christi, Texas; Durham, N.C.; Greeley, Colo.; Newark, N.J.; Omaha, Neb.; Philadelphia; Pittsburgh; Sacramento, Calif.; Tacoma, Wash.; Tampa, Fla.; Trenton, N.J.; York, Pa.

Established Trends

Supporting summer jobs programs.

Over the years, a large number of cities have supported summer youth employment programs — subsidized wages for youth who work in government or nonprofit settings — in order to help young people learn job skills and workplace norms, develop a work history and connect with adults who can provide advice and references. Even as federal funding for summer jobs was drying up earlier in the decade, cities recognized that the need was greater than ever. According to the Center for Labor Market Statistics and Northeastern University, teens and young adults failed to make any employment gains between 2000 and 2007, and were the most negatively impacted by the labor market downturn in 2008. The percentage of teenagers (16-19) who were able to find summer employment in 2008 sank to less than one-third, a 60-year low.

Despite these challenges, mayoral leadership proved critical to finding adequate funding and summer job placements in cities across the country. In the face of federal cuts to summer jobs funding, the city of St. Louis established its own

local program. Mayor Francis Slay provided leadership to garner both public and private funding and summer jobs placements in St. Louis hospitals, day care centers, senior centers, parks and public and private organizations.

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The City of Los Angeles' summer youth employment program, Hire LA Youth, experienced strong performance for several years running based on strong partnerships between the city, the L.A. Chamber of Commerce and local educational entities that help prepare the youth for their summer placements. In addition to an annual pitch to the business community, the city collaborates with other systems to identify vulnerable youth that would benefit from placements, including: probation court; foster youth and mental health agencies; and the new regional partnership, made up of all local government entities, the chamber of commerce and labor unions. On the heels of two years of record success, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa challenged city staff and employers in the community to ensure that 50 percent more youth from low-income families were placed in gainful positions in the summer of 2009.

In addition, cities have taken new approaches to make summer jobs programs more inclusive and to strengthen the feeling among youth participants that they can make a difference in their community. For instance, in Chicago, young people with disabilities participate in Mayor Richard Daley's Summer Jobs Program through a special partnership between the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD), the Department of Children and Youth Services and the Chicago Public Schools. In the process, MOPD connects participating students with professional mentors who have disabilities to provide support and encouragement.

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In Cincinnati, Ohio, Mayor Mark Mallory's Summer Youth Jobs Initiative offers youth choices about the skills they would like to develop. One of the choices, the Muralworks summer jobs program, employs 80 young people for six weeks to create murals in six Cincinnati neighborhoods. Under the direction of a mentor artist, the program teaches teamwork, builds artistic skills and strengthens civic pride in participating youth.

Operating teen parenting programs.

When teenagers become parents, most are unprepared for the responsibility of raising a child while continuing with their education or holding down a job. In all parts of the country, city leaders have found that an investment in connecting these young parents to needed supports — including education, job training and parenting skills — can have a significant payoff in the lives of both the parents and their children. Some cities have created a full-service family center to meet the needs of parenting teens, while others operate programs out of schools or community centers.

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In Lexington-Fayette, Ky., for example, the Division of Family Services collaborates with community partners to operate a Family Care Center. This exciting center provides teen mothers with case management, access to an alternative high school or GED classes, nationally accredited child care for children ages 6 weeks to 5 years, on-site employment skills training in a social enterprise setting, home visits for first-time parents and pediatric medical and dental care for their children. The City of Aumsville, Ore., in partnership with the school district, obtained a grant from the state to create a family and child development center that would house a Teen Parent Program and other services for young children and parents.

Other communities have focused on schools as the primary location for serving teen parents. In New Haven, Conn., where the city runs the public school system, pregnant and parenting teens can attend school at the Polly T. McCabe Center. Participating students benefit from small classes, personal attention from staff, wellness-stress management classes and child care that is supervised by a pediatric nurse and early childhood specialist. Teen parents who participate in the LYFE program in New York City receive child care while attending regular or alternative high schools or preparing for the GED. They are also encouraged to take parenting classes for credit, participate in support groups and take advantage of free cultural activities with their children through the program. In Louisville, Ky., the South Park TAPP (Teenage Pregnancy Program) High School is supported by the city and school district. Started in 1972, this program has a high graduation rate and 61 percent of the girls who attend go onto college.

While the focus of most teen parent programs is on young mothers, some cities have also created programs specifically for young fathers. For instance, in Phoenix, the STEP-UP (Skills, Training, Education, Employment Program for Unemployed Male Parents) program began in 1990 and complements the city's Young Families CAN program for teen mothers. Built around case management and counseling, the program offers young fathers a wide variety of supports, including legal assistance in paternity establishment, education and job training, a mentor and even opportunities for quality family time, such as the annual Family Camp Event. In Milwaukee, the city's fatherhood initiative has a specific effort to target teen and young adult fathers, called "Teen Talk." Teen Talk is led by peer educators who offer a safe space for support and discussion to more than 250 participating youth and young adult fathers.

Providing evening recreational opportunities for at-risk youth.

Cities large and small have found that young people who are busy with athletics and other positive recreational activities are more likely to be healthy, connect with adults and stay out of trouble. As a result, more youth centers and recreation programs are providing late-night programming for young people in high-crime urban neighborhoods.

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Los Angeles is keeping the lights on until midnight in 16 high-crime parks and adjoining recreation centers through the Summer Night Lights program, a key element of the city's gang prevention effort.

The Department of Parks and Recreation in Seattle offers its Late Night Recreation Program on Friday and Saturday nights as a positive alternative to life on the street for high-risk Seattle youth. Within select park facilities, including the Teen Life Center, the city offers: athletic activities such as basketball, volleyball, martial arts and other sports; tutoring; computer training; teen parenting programs; and cultural activities such as ethnic dance and bead-making. According to the Seattle Police Department, crime has been reduced by an average of 30 percent in some Late Night center neighborhoods.

Similarly, Los Angeles is keeping the lights on until midnight in 16 high-crime parks and adjoining recreation centers through the Summer Night Lights program. The city organizes sports, music, food and even connections to summer jobs for participating young people, with a youth squad hired to promote and staff the program. In 2008, the first year of the Summer Night Lights program, city officials reported that the affected communities experienced significant declines in violent gang-related crime (down 17 percent), homicides (down 86 percent) and aggravated assaults (down 23 percent).

The Department of Parks and Recreation in the city of Oakland, Calif., is improving the attitudes and skills of at-risk youth, ages 13 to 21, in the afternoon and evening through their Radical, Roving Recreation (RRR) program. Collaborating with the public schools and court probation officers, the department provides unique programming such as yoga, radio broadcasting, shoe design, gardening and catering to students in distressed neighborhoods, juvenile halls and alternative schools. In addition, RRR offers youth participants opportunities to receive paid training and employment in city jobs such as lifeguards and camp counselors. In just three years, the city has enrolled 67 youth from juvenile detention or probation; these participants have less than a 5 percent recidivism rate.

FOUR NEW IDEAS TO CONSIDER

Youth in Transition

Support “Opportunity Passports” for youth transitioning out of foster care. Touted as the centerpiece of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative, Opportunity Passport™ is a promising new effort that combines several forms of assistance for young people who are aging out of foster care: a personal debit account; a matched savings account that enables young people to save for specific investments, such as education or a down payment on a home; and a host of local “door openers,” which vary locally but may include pre-approval for community college registration or expedited access to job training or adult education courses. While the Jim Casey Family Foundation is currently funding efforts in 10 cities nationwide and 10 counties in Michigan, municipalities are not currently taking the lead in these communities. City officials can give a major boost to such efforts by seeking to replicate this model.

Establish a school-conditioned jobs program for vulnerable youth. MDRC, an education and social policy research organization based in New York City, has developed a series of intriguing ideas that build on a successfully implemented, large-scale youth demonstration program from the 1970s, which guaranteed jobs to high school students based on their attendance and performance in school. These proposals suggest that mayors and other city leaders can improve both employment and education outcomes for vulnerable youth by linking paid work and the continuation or resumption of schooling. Three promising options advanced by MDRC include: a basic literacy and numeracy class for low-skilled disconnected youth (those functioning at 5th to 7th grade level) augmented by conditional paid work; a career-oriented GED program for high school dropouts combined with subsidized employment; and a summer program that offers both education and paid work to at-risk high school juniors on a college campus.

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Offer barrier-busting vouchers to help young people continue their education, job training and employment. Even when strongly motivated to complete a training program or find and keep a good job, out-of-school young people often face small obstacles that stand in the way of self-sufficiency. The Indianapolis Private Industry Council’s “barrier-busting” vouchers, provided through its Youth Employment Services (YES) program with support from the Lilly Endowment, help jobless youth overcome a variety of barriers to their employment goals. For instance, participants can use vouchers to pay for bus passes, overdue parking tickets, gasoline or a driver’s license so they can get to their jobs; clothing needed for job interviews; uniforms and tools required for work; and help with rent, bills, tuition and child care costs to prevent interruptions to their education, training and employment. A survey of YES participants conducted by an independent evaluator from Brandeis University’s Center for Youth and Communities showed that half could not have continued their employment or training without the vouchers. Municipal leaders can promote this model with local workforce boards and service providers, identify or raise additional funds to help cover the cost of the vouchers, and ensure that they are available to all participants as needed throughout the fiscal or program year.

Find new ways to use technology to re-connect with otherwise disconnected youth. Recognizing the central role that technology plays in how youth communicate and seek information, city leaders can explore new models for using technology to reach youth in transition. In an approach similar to that adopted in creating interactive, online tools for reporting potholes or crimes and requesting municipal services, city leaders can work with service providers, Web developers and researchers to exploit fully technologies available to connect youth in transition with caring adults, jobs, city services and education. Smart-phone applications and social networking sites offer two new ways for cities to help youth access needed services and track progress on educational goals, employment referrals and other positive youth development activities. Progress made on “high-tech” communication, however, should complement rather than replace the “high-touch” elements of effective outreach and support to youth in transition.